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UNCLAS ANTANANARIVO 001231

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR MUNICIPAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS UNDERWAY

11. (U) SUMMARY: Campaign season for Madagascar's December 12 municipal elections is well underway, with the ruling TIM party dominating throughout most of the country. As usual, the Government of Madagascar (GOM) is mobilizing at the highest levels to pitch in with the campaigns; ministers are serving as "coaches" to TIM candidates throughout the country. The campaign is unexpectedly heating up in the capital city of Antananarivo, with only two of the six candidates, TIM's Hery Rafalimanana and youthful businessman Andry Rajoelina, considered serious contenders. Political observers are watching this face-off closely, as past mayors have gone on to occupy high-level government positions including the presidency.
END SUMMARY.

THE RACE IN ANTANANARIVO HEATS UP
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12. (U) Political observers are watching the campaign in the capital city of Antananarivo closely. Past mayors have gone on to occupy high-level government positions, most notably current President Marc Ravalomanana. The campaign is unexpectedly heating up, with only two of the six candidates, Hery Rafalimanana and Andry Rajoelina, considered serious contenders. After serving eight months as "acting" mayor, Hery Rafalimanana is President Ravalomanana's Tiako I Madagasikara (TIM) party candidate. His campaign message -- "Look at what I have done in Antananarivo in only eight months" -- refers to Antananarivo's recent "facelift," largely funded in preparation for the Indian Ocean Games in August. A TIM member and "TIKO boy" (a former director in President Ravalomanana's TIKO conglomerate), he was a relative unknown until taking up his position as "acting mayor" in early 2007.

13. Rafalimanana's main opponent is Andry Rajoelina, an independent, who has surprised political observers by winning significant support among constituents under 30. An independently wealthy young man from a rich family, Rajoelina is the Director General of INJET, a communication company that owns most of the billboards in Antananarivo, and the owner of private radio and television stations called "VIVA." His youthful appearance and endless energy have earned him the nickname "Andry TGV," alluding to the fact he moves as quickly as French high-speed train. While this endears him to younger voters, some older constituents consider him too "boyish" for serious business. Although he has presented no clear platform, his campaign message is, "My success in the business world speaks for itself, and I can make Antananarivo successful too." Post notes Rajoelina is strangely reminiscent of President Ravalomanana when he first entered the political scene in the late 1990s as a surprise candidate: a young, successful and dynamic businessman. At this point, Rafalimanana appears to have the upper hand, but those disillusioned with the current administration consider Rajoelina a strong alternative.

¶4. (U) The remaining four candidates in Antananarivo, relative unknowns not allied with any formal political party, have very little hope to win significant votes. Marc Ramiarinjatovo's campaign apparel displays his picture with both U.S. and European Union flags in the background. Jonah Andrianaivo Andrianasolo's campaign slogan evokes tribal leanings: "Antananarivo for the Merina [tribe]." Nasolo Valiavo, who writes his own op-ed column, and Malala Savaron, the sole female candidate, have both stayed largely silent.

THREE ELECTIONS POSTPONED

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¶5. (U) Elections in Nosy Be, Ile Sainte Marie, and Fort Dauphin have been postponed to an unspecified date in order to allow the local governments to coordinate and complete important development projects. Some opposition members claim the postponements are motivated by political reasons. Still, mayoral candidates in all other elections going forward will be given equal free airtime on national television and radio, approximately 36 seconds per candidate per day.

¶6. COMMENT: The face-off in Antananarivo is of most interest in this election. The Department-funded National Democratic Institute program in Madagascar will organize a live debate on national television December 10 between Antananarivo contenders Hery Rafalimanana, Andry Rajoelina and Marc Ramiarinjatovo. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT